



A SHORT COLLEGE COURSE

by George S Chappell

with pictures by William Hogarth Jr



THE merry quality of undergraduate life is one of its enduring and endearing characteristics. To some minds the term "student" is associated with "pranks." Indeed, "student" connotes almost everything but study. It must not be supposed, however, that our universities are constantly in a state of carnival. One sees no maypoles; morris dances have gone out. Our present day collegian is normally a very dignified young gentleman. Returning to the academic groves, I am always somewhat appalled by the dignity and poise of the undergraduates. The freshmen are a bit woolly and jejune, but the seniors, Lord bless you, I am abashed before them.

However, be not deceived. Back of their somewhat world-weary masks the spirit of youth peers out, ready to leap into vivid action. They may appear most reserved to their elders. They are cap-in-hand and most polite. It is "Yes, sir," and "No, sir." How heartrending it is to be called "sir" when one longs to be a boy. But we can never quite reach them. They must play by themselves. We can only eavesdrop and look on. When I think of trying to join in I recall with horror my undergraduate feeling toward certain old grads who used to insist that they were as young as we were. Old Man Spencer was one of our pet pests. He used to make monthly visits to his son, to that young man's despair.

"For heaven's sake!" we used to moan. "Is that old fossil back again?"

The best thing the older generation can do is to get together and swap stories of what cut-ups they used to be in their day. This is a neverfailing source of entertainment. Looking backward seems to hallow the most outrageous performances and surround them with an aura of humor. Apparently, the earlier periods of American college life were marked by more violent pastimes than obtain to-day. The history of my own alma mater recites conflicts between the student body and a group of firemen which eventually took on the character of a serious battle. There were town and gown riots, doubtless superinduced by a merry spirit of play. One man was shot, just for fun, of course; but, still, shot.

An ancient wheeze, always recited in every college, is that of taking the deacon's chaise apart and reconstructing it, horse and all, in one of the recitation halls. It probably happened once, somewhere. Another vintage line is that of how Bill stopped the chapel clock by shooting an arrow into the dial. This must have happened many centuries ago, when men still used bows and arrows.

A more authentic yarn was related to me by a kindly old "prof," now gathered to his fathers. It dealt with his own college days, which were truly rigorous, the days of the college pump and the old unheated brick row. "We had Dr. Smith in mathematics," said my old friend. "It was a bitter winter day, and some of the young men"—he coughed apologetically—"some of the young men had removed the window sash. They had also buttered the blackboards so that the chalk made no impression. Dr. Smith looked somewhat perplexed, but finally addressed us. 'Young gentlemen,' he said, 'you may keep on your hats and overcoats. We will do our problems on the floor.' It was one of the most uncomfortable recitations I have ever attended."

Good old doctor! I can see his eyes twinkling behind his spectacles.

The first of the organized gayeties of college life are the courtesies extended to the incoming class by the sophomores. I am not in a position to know the details of modern procedure, but human nature does not change greatly, and I presume the present day freshman feels very much as I did when I first stepped out into the New Haven gloaming. Mentally I was a scared rabbit. Moreover, I knew instinctively that my duty was to be caught. Predatory bands of sophomores roamed through the night shades, hustling with them divers novices in states of disarray, hair ruffled, coats inside out, trousers pulled up. We were rather thrilled by it. Even to be hazed gave us a certain importance. Though the pursuing posers emitted blood-curdling whoops and simulated the attitude of a band of Turks cutting off an aged Armenian from his herd, we still felt that it was largely make believe.

I recall the scene at "Billy's," a cheerful resort, where mirth mingled with malt. This was the appointed theater in which we as freshmen performed. Upon "Billy's" floor the freshman eight rowed to victory with toothpick oars. A dozen acts were going on at once, vocal solos, gymnastics, strong-man acts and tableaux. Not a little imagination was exercised. My particular role was cast in a stirring representation of "The Wreck of the Hesperus," my classmate, Callahan, being the Hesperus, while I played the ocean. It was my duty to roll violently against Callahan with a loud cry of "splash!" at each concussion. The storm lasted nearly an hour.

One of my confreres had a somewhat trying time, being routed through the public square as Perseus—at least, I think it was Perseus; my friend's name was

Bolles. In place of the slender thread which guided the classic originally, Bolles was attached to a ball of stout kite twine, which positively refused to break, even when run over by trolley cars or wrapped around policemen's legs. The string had the additional disadvantage of being a clew leading directly to his person, so that it got him into trouble rather than out of it.

Little harm was done, however, by our moderate hazing. More unfortunate was the freshman who, instead of playing the game and allowing himself to be caught, sought concealment. Such a one was a stalwart youth named Bendelmeyer, who was discovered, ostrichlike, with his head under his bed. Further than that he could not go. He was plucked forth and treated to violent indignities and facial decorations, after which he was led to various crowded street corners, where he proclaimed to the jeering citizens: "My name is Bendelmeyer. They found me under the bed." The opprobrium of this effort at concealment clung to him for many a day.

Early in our college course we had the organized gayeties of class rushes, fence fights and Omega Lambda Chi night. The last named was a particularly lovely festival, with a real kick in it. The freshmen en masse were supposed to run the gantlet between heavily hobnailed rows of sophomores, who lined the sides of a narrow passage between two buildings, a location known as the Pass of Thermopylae. The basic sophomore idea was to implant a sound boot where it would do the most good. We on our side did not neglect certain defensive measures. Sofa pillows and hearth rugs were at a premium. An inventive contemporary lined his corporeal

base with a tin tray, which made his passage blatantly sonorous. This he-celebration has, I believe, been discontinued. One side of Thermopylae was torn down, for one thing. I regret the passing of this virile tradition. If I ever make a lot of money I shall present my beloved alma mater with a memorial alley, in which the good old custom can be revived. Thank goodness it lasted long enough for me to get in a few good kicks at the class which followed mine!

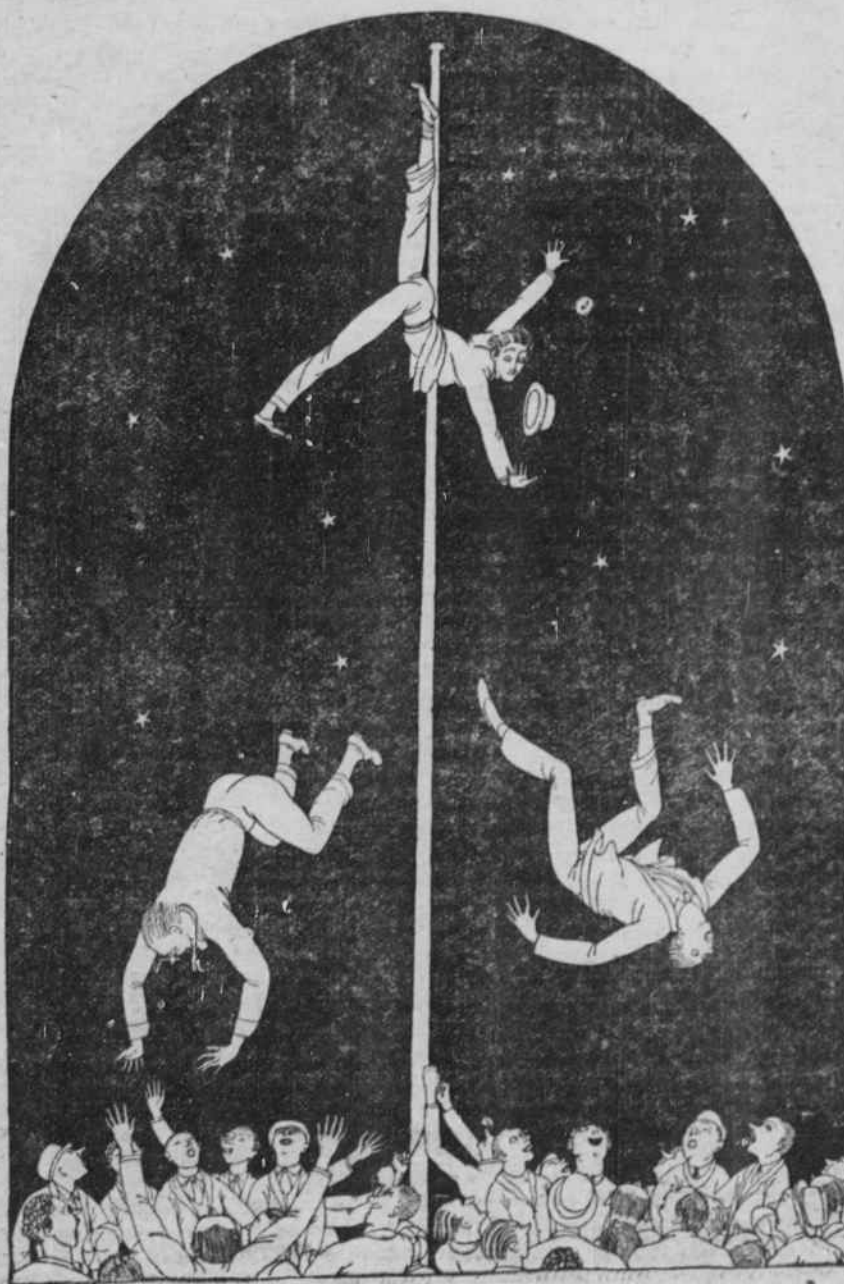
A fete day or night which had a touch of the supernatural about it was bottle night. This came in the late spring on no definite date. Its celebration was a matter of sheer inspiration. Floating in the June air was the knowledge that soon, very soon, it would be bottle night. Then suddenly a wave of realization would sweep the campus, telling hundreds of young men that it actually was bottle night. Instantly a hundred windows would fly up and carefully amassed collections of bottles, water jugs, tooth mugs, soap dishes and more intimate containers would be hurled into the outer darkness. Courts and campus resounded with the crash of crockery. Dormitories vied with each other, laying down a deadly barrage in front of their respective entries and cheering loudly when some especially important piece of falience added its deep note to the drum fire. It was a gorgeous orgy of destruction, a splendid releasing of that pent-up desire to smash things which lies hidden in every breast. When I read old Omar's wish to shatter the world to bits and remold it nearer to the heart's desire I always think, "Oh, old boy, you never knew bottle night!" However, his jug had wine in it, which is different.

Of course, the best of college fun is the least organized, the accidental and spontaneous. My mind goes back to a joyous fire which occurred during my senior year. It was in a frame house occupied by a paperhanger. On the first floor was his shop; above was his stock-room. There is no one so helpful at a fire as a college student. He always wants to do the fireman's work for him, though this is not always appreciated. In the case I speak of a large section of the student body had succeeded in evading both police and fire departments and reached the second floor, where they proceeded to save the stock. This was done by throwing rolls of paper out of the windows, care being taken to hang on to one end. It was like hanging banners on the outer wall. Never have I seen such a decorative fire. The house looked as if it had suddenly turned inside out and the streets for blocks were paved with acanthus leaves and cabbage rose designs. At the end of an hour the fire chief departed, mopping his brow and saying: "I kin put the fire out, but I'll be damned if I kin put them stoodents out."

What a lovely day it was, too, when the pie wagon ran away. I can see it now, careening up Chapel Street. Directly opposite the college, by some divine chance, the entire bottom of the cart dropped out and drawers of pies began raining into the street. Within two minutes every student face was full of pie. The last to arrive on the scene, naturally, was the drier and his efforts to collect his pie money were as successful as that of the Allies to collect from Germany.

Other days, other customs. They have "Whiffenpoofs" now, organized clown carnivals during football games. At heart they probably have not changed at all. They are the same idiotic boys we were and one of our greatest joys is to get close together with an old crony and decide that our day was just about the best that ever was! Because, as a matter of fact, it was.

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